

House Committee on Inter State & Foreign Commerce

The Washington Merry-Go-Round

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CBS Films a Comic Opera 'Invasion'

By Jack Anderson

The zany details of CBS's abortive attempt to film an invasion of Haiti all the way through to the anticipated "assassination" of Papa Doc Duvalier, the Haitian dictator, is described in a congressional report kept under lock and key.

The invasion plot was a slapstick, Marx Brothers adventure, better suited for an episode of the spy spoof "Get Smart" than a CBS documentary. At one point, the conspirators, wearing a hidden CBS mike, tried to shake down Papa Doc for \$200,000. They approached the Haitian consul in Miami, Eugene Maximillian, and offered to call off the invasion for a satchel full of greenbacks.

Six of the invasion leaders, ultimately, were convicted of violating U.S. laws. The House subcommittee which investigated the madcap 1966 affair, however, was disappointed that CBS escaped conviction.

Copies of the subcommittee's report were taken out of the locked files this week and submitted to the members for their comments and corrections. This column has obtained a bootleg copy.

On almost every page, the report rebukes CBS, charging in summary:

"CBS funds were provided for the leasing of a 67-foot schooner which was to be utilized by the invasion force; expenses were reimbursed for

the transportation of weapons which were to be subsequently used by the conspirators; various payments were made to Rolando Masferrer, the leader of the invasion conspiracy, with full knowledge of his identity and criminal intentions. If these acts did not actually involve the network in the conspiracy to violate the U.S. Neutrality Act, they came dangerously close to doing so.

"There were, undeniably, misadventures and other circumstances involving both the conspirators and the CBS News organization which, in retrospect, seem humorous and even ridiculous. This should not obscure the fact that hundreds of thousands of dollars and many hundreds of man-hours were expended in the accumulation and assembly of a massive stockpile of illegal military paraphernalia for unlawful use against a government which, however reprehensible some may view its policies, is nevertheless at peace with the U.S.

"A diplomatic representative of this same foreign power was subjected to an attempted extortion, an attempt which was facilitated by the use of hidden recording equipment supplied by CBS News personnel and used by an individual who was himself in the pay of CBS News." The report identifies one of the alleged shakedown artists as Ralph Serrano, alias Ralph Almonte, who has "a substantial criminal record and was recently

deported to the Dominican Republic."

CBS made payments to the plotters, including Serrano, in cash. The subcommittee estimates that the network's total outlay "in its unsuccessful attempt to document the overthrow of the Haitian government exceeded \$200,000." This money, the report strongly suggests, helped to finance the illegal operation.

CBS, of course, has taken vigorous exception to the subcommittee's charges. In letters to Chairman Harley Staggers (D-W.Va.), CBS officials have insisted that their reporters and cameramen sought merely to record a news event, not to influence it in any way. CBS funds did not finance the invasion attempt, declare the officials, but merely covered normal expenditures for a documentary.

The conspirators originally intended to invade Cuba and overthrow Dictator Fidel Castro. They decided this could be accomplished best from a base in Haiti. So, as a preliminary exercise, they chose to invade Haiti and overthrow Duvalier. Then they calculated it would be easier to conquer Haiti from a base in the Dominican Republic and considered beginning their counter-revolutionary activity with an invasion of the Dominican Republic. But they thought better of this and, instead, tried to negotiate with the Dominican Republic for the use of a base.

CBS gave \$1,500 to a shadowy munitions dealer named Mitchell Wer Bel III to conduct these implausible negotiations. As it happened, the Dominican Republic turned down the deal and kicked Wer Bel's representative out of the country.

By the time Wer Bel's secret testimony was taken, he looked back on the invasion plot as a lark.

He testified that CBS had also put up a \$1500 down payment to lease the "mother ship" for the invasion—a 67-foot skiff known as "Poor Richard" which got no further than the plotters' hideout at the luxurious Ocean Reef resort on Key Largo, Fla. The bills at Ocean Reef were also paid by CBS.

"The boat never had anything on it except a few good, long drinking sessions," testified Wer Bel. It was seized by creditors, and the conspirators were obliged to change their strategy from a seaborne to airborne invasion.

CBS finally got tired of paying the bills for this great non-adventure and, after taking 45,000 feet of film over an eight-month period, cancelled the project. William Leonard, vice president of CBS News, explained in an interoffice memo: "We see simply the nonadventure of a ragtag crew next to whom Duvalier himself looks good, a gang openly flouting U.S. law, in the end to no purpose."

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